

Free Trade's First Missionary: Sir John Bowring in Europe and Asia.

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The first thing that a reader of *Free Trade's First Missionary: Sir John Bowring in Europe and Asia* may notice is that the author of the biography also bears the surname of his subject. The reader's keen eye is rewarded: Philip Bowring, a Hong Kong-based journalist, is distantly related to Sir John, an "Exeter lad" from a modest background, who went through an astonishing range of careers which could fill several lives. Merchant, poet, translator, writer, member of Parliament, diplomat, plenipotentiary in China and governor of Hong Kong – these are just a few of Sir John Bowring's occupations. He deserves much more recognition "not because he was the most famous in any one field but because of his impact on so many" (1).

In a sense it is fitting that the first full-length biography of Bowring should also be written by a Bowring. The work repeatedly highlights Bowring's care for his family, "a constant theme of his life" (224) apart from trade. One of his hymns concludes with the lines "And yet a happy family / Is but an earlier heaven" (45). This is merely one example of the several extensive quotations from Bowring's lyrical works in the biography. His concern for the welfare of his children was certainly a positive trait of his character. Readers get to know Bowring as a person in this vivid account of his life. This is as much a study of a man's character as a historical narrative: time and again the biographer connects Bowring's actions with his personality, especially when things went wrong.

Unfortunately for Bowring, the single event that etched his name in history books is decidedly unfavourable. In 1856, as plenipotentiary in China, Bowring ordered the shelling of Canton in an attempt to force the intransigent Mandarins to abide by the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, which concluded the (First) Opium War. Originally intended only as a "police action" (5), the bombardment precipitated a full-scale conflict with China which would culminate in the burning and looting of the Summer Palace in Peking. Philip Bowring comments that "age ... had perhaps not made him wiser but more impatient" (147). The biographer candidly acknowledges that his ancestor was "a flawed man" (3). His impatience with the uncooperative Viceroy of Canton had brought the Qing Dynasty close to the point of collapse, and in the end cost Bowring his job of plenipotentiary. It was ironic that a life-long liberal promoter of free trade and fierce critic of the First Opium War should launch, inadvertently, what future historians would call the Second Opium War.

It was also Bowring's rash character that brought him to Asia, for he did not expect to move to the East in his fifties. Imprudent investments in railroad and iron ruined his finances, and it was at this moment, in 1848, that the post of consul of Canton was made available to him, providing him with a much-needed stable income. One comes away from this episode keenly feeling the capricious course of history. Holding the distinction of starting a war overshadowed his earlier achievements in Europe, and this is what the present biographical study attempts to redress.

Born in 1792 and receiving little formal schooling, Bowring learned the family business of wool trade and made his way to London at age 18. He showed his linguistic skills early on, picking up numerous languages from visiting merchants. Soon Bowring – who spoke Spanish and Portuguese – found himself in Spain, coordinating supplies for Wellington's army during the Peninsular War against France. His intellectual curiosity and keen observation quickly

bore fruit. He published an English translation of Spanish poetry and romances, described by a contemporary reviewer as a pioneering work. Volumes of translations from Russian, Dutch, Swedish, Hungarian, and Serbian literary works would follow. Bowring, in his own words, wanted to “remove in some degree the too general ignorance which prevails in this country as to the state of letters” in different parts of Europe (28). This displays “an internationalism that was ahead of its time” (224). Indeed, Philip Bowring concludes that Sir John was ahead of his time in many respects. In Spain he learned that trade restrictions generated corruption and monopoly. To Bowring the idealist, his biographer notes, “communication had a civilizing effect,” and in practice “the unfettered exchange of goods and ideas ... was the way to a more prosperous and peaceful future for all” (230).

The lesson from Spain was compatible with his Unitarian faith, which embraced education, science, liberal ideas, and political reforms. Bowring would go as far as to declare that “Jesus Christ is free trade and free trade is Jesus Christ” (19). He became a follower of the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, and through him Bowring would climb up the social ladder, making important connections with liberal thinkers and political leaders of his age. His association with Bentham brought him into a government committee examining public accounts. After several attempts he was elected as a Member of Parliament (1835-37; 1841-48), where he was a champion of liberal and radical causes. The repeal of the Corn Laws, women’s and workers’ rights, prison reforms, and the abolition of the death penalty were on his agenda. His interest in railroad and iron was again in line with his character: “it was typical that he threw his heart and his money into a field in which he had no experience but that was the driving force of England,” notes his biographer (111). The railroad venture drove him to Asia, where he met with frustration in both China and Hong Kong. As the fourth governor of the colony (1854-59), his efforts were undermined by politically influential British commercial houses and unscrupulous officials. Bowring would not find today’s Hong Kong unfamiliar as some of the same problems still beset the city. Bowring Street in Jordan, Hong Kong, is named after him; the area is the site of many small shops selling cheap garments made in mainland China. He would be pleased to see that business is thriving there.

If Bowring faced his greatest defeat in China, his most lasting legacy, according to this biography, is to be found in Thailand. He had a warm friendship with the learned King Rama IV, and the subsequent trade treaty he secured between Siam and Great Britain helped develop Siam into an exporter of agricultural products. Even more significantly, the treaty with a great Western power allowed Siam to maintain its independence when surrounding countries were gradually colonized.

If there is a problem with the study, it would be the author’s eagerness to defend his subject. The chapters about Bowring’s work in China sound too apologetic. It is also questionable to refer to Bowring as a missionary (even metaphorically), given that he was very ambivalent about the activities of such religious zealots. Still, *Free Trade’s First Missionary* remains a very readable appreciation of a fascinating life, usefully filling a gap in scholarship by offering a well-rounded portrait of an interesting and important nineteenth-century personality.

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